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ABSTRACT

The experiences of 9 of 13 institute managers at 1 technical and further education (TAFE) institute in New South Wales, Australia, were examined to enhance understanding of the experiences of institute managers in open-ended interviews. The interview questions focused on the following aspects of the job of institute manager: main reasons for becoming an institute manager; major influences on seeking to be an institute manager; extent of preparation for the job and the extent to which the job matched interviewees' expectations; best and worst aspects of the job; actual and desired responsibilities of the job; personal leadership style and influences on its development; level of involvement in decision making, leadership, and change; professional development needs and how they are being met; and managers' future plans. The following were among the recommendations emerging from the study: (1) career development must be considered and planned for; (2) aspiring institute managers should be given opportunities to gain experience in the position of institute manager; and (3) to successfully lead change in TAFE, managers must consolidate their relationships with head teachers and other staff in teaching sections while exploring avenues for growth and innovation in educational leadership. (Contains 20 references.) (MN)

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The world of work of a TAFE institute manager

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Educational change is occurring in Technical and Further Education (TAFE) at a level not experienced in the past. Requirements for an educational system that is flexible and responsive to change have necessitated changes in both the culture and the structure of the organisation. Change, though, does not occur unless it has the support and commitment of management. In TAFE New South Wales (NSW) the responsibility and accountability for change rests largely on managers at the college and faculty level. These managers must drive change if it is to be successful.

This paper looks at the results of a study (currently under review) designed to explore how institute managers are managing within their new environment. The reflections of a number of institute managers in one institute of TAFE in NSW were examined using content analysis, with the aim of better understanding the experiences of people in these positions within TAFE.

In a paper presented at the AVETRA conference last year (Rice 2000a), the economic imperatives driving change in the vocational education and training (VET) sector were discussed along with the argument that TAFE has not been particularly responsive to the needs of this new training system. In fact Anderson contends (1998, p 22) that TAFE 'is now in a profound state of disarray and instability ... TAFE is fighting for its survival' in trying to reconcile its diverse roles – roles that range from satisfying the needs of business and industry to TAFE's traditional role of responding to wider community needs.

I have argued elsewhere (Rice 2000b, p 68) that TAFE's ability to respond to the challenges of the new training system depend largely upon the people within the organisation, particularly those in senior managerial positions. Educational theorists agree that these people should be transformational leaders (Burford 1996; Duignan and Macpherson 1992; Hallinger 1992; Ozga 1993; Sergiovanni 1990) who encourage collaborative decision-making, have a participative management style, possess people skills, act as role models for others, interact individually and face-to-face with their followers, are regularly seen at the workplace and consistently reinforce their visions of the future (Parry 1996; Smith and Hutchinson 1995).

How, then, are TAFE executives reacting to changes in the ways vocational education and training is managed? Have investigations into how to develop TAFE institutes and staff (Moran 1998, p 181) occurred at the management level?

A review of the literature would suggest not.

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The literature

A review of seven years of vocational education research by John Stevenson (2000) uncovers no research specifically directed at TAFE managers and how they are adjusting to this era of change. An American study by Finch et al (1991) into the leadership behaviours of successful vocational education administrators determined that 'they are faced with complex and difficult challenges and apply their skills, knowledge and experience to deal with them', but 'although there are a number of vocational education administrators across the United States who are quite successful, a certain segment of the administrator population may be only marginally qualified or less than adequately prepared for their current jobs' (1991, p 31).

The theme of professional development for vocational education practitioners has been developed by a number of researchers, including Simons and Harris, who recognise the significance of professional development in helping staff in vocational education and training 'cope with the increasing complexity, ambiguity and uncertainty of their working world' (1998, p 155). Mageean's study of the continuing education needs of academic and senior college staff in TAFE concluded that, while all staff will continually face new situations and will need to be prepared for them, 'staff development for senior staff was often overlooked or needed to be too specialised to fit into the usual TAFE staff development programs' (1987, p 27).

Lundberg, in his work on the impact of the training reform agenda on TAFE managers, recognised that these managers 'have a key role in the success or failure of the management of change [but] arguably, their voices have not been permitted to influence the change process sufficiently to date' (1996, p 6). In Lundberg's study, two of the major issues the managers felt impacted on their managerial responsibilities were management of the change itself and staff development.

In the United States a research study of 69 vocational administrators in 12 states revealed the importance of on-the-job experiences for the leadership development of administrators (Hopkins et al 1998). Their contention was that 'the need for high quality leadership in vocational education is certainly as critical today as it has ever been. (In fact) some would argue that with the major education reform currently underway, quality leadership is even more important that at any time in the past' (1998, p 52).

While there has been a growing amount of research into school educators and administrators, Dinham et al (2000, p 3) argue that 'the 'middle manager' level in schools has received far less attention'. The crucial role played by middle managers, though, in operationalising educational change was identified in this study along with the problems associated with the demands the position makes on these leaders. The work by Dinham et al (2000) concluded that (in relation to school Heads of Department):

- there was a need for ways to identify and nurture potential leaders;
- working with others was the most enjoyable aspect of the educational administrator's day;
- the lack of time available compromised the ability to complete core business requirements;
- there was a need to reduce aspects of administration;

- the managers require formal preparation for their role as well as individually tailored and packaged professional development programs grounded in an experiential problem solving framework; and
- there was a need to determine where the next generation of leaders would come from, given that many Heads of Department do not aspire to promotions positions.

There is an obvious lack of relevant literature on the role TAFE managers are playing in the move to a more flexible, responsive and competitive vocational education and training system, although it is refreshing to see that the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) has, amongst its current research priorities, an examination of management and leadership in VET. The research being reported by Ian Falk at this AVETRA conference will also assist in addressing this gap in the research.

Project aim

The lack of research into how TAFE is being managed and how TAFE managers are coping within their new environment thus prompted this study, along with a need to understand the 'world of work' of TAFE institute managers (IMs). It was decided to concentrate, for the purposes of this study, on those IMs within TAFE who supervise, either directly or indirectly, teaching staff.

The research design, following that devised by Dinham et al (2000), was guided by the following questions:

1. Why do IMs aspire to the position?
2. How well are IMs prepared for the role?
3. What are the elements of IMs' workloads?
4. What do IMs like most and least about their work?
5. How would IMs prefer to allocate their time and effort?
6. How do IMs develop their leadership style?
7. How do IMs contribute to college and institute decision-making?
8. What are the professional development needs of IMs and how are these being addressed?
9. What are the future aspirations of IMs?

Method

The purpose of this study was to examine the world of work of the TAFE IM by gathering information from these managers in relation to how they perceived their work, development and future in the TAFE system.

The qualitative paradigm was considered appropriate for the study because it allowed an interpretation of the world of work according to the views and experiences of the IMs (Merriam 1988). Within this paradigm, elements of Strauss and Corbin's grounded theory approach were used to analyse and categorise data (1990).

Nine of the thirteen IMs approached volunteered to be interviewed. They represented five different colleges and one institute office, and a response rate of

64%. Of these nine managers, five were female and four were male. These participants were interviewed using an interview schedule devised by Dinham et al (2000) that had been modified to suit the TAFE environment. This interview schedule contained both demographic and open-ended questions designed to obtain the perceptions of the people being interviewed. Interviews were conducted over the phone, usually in the evening. Notes, including direct quotations, were recorded on individual interview schedules.

Data analysis resulted in a number of categories being developed from a process of open coding (Strauss and Corbin 1990) and followed closely the questions on the interview schedule.

Summary of research findings

The results of the study have been reduced to point form for the purposes of this paper. For interest, one quote from a participant has been added to each section of the results.

Becoming an institute manager

The main reasons given for becoming an IM were:

- the challenge of the role (5 IMs from 9)
- ambition and personal growth (5)
- to influence change and policy (5)

'I wanted to make a difference to myself and the strategic direction of the college'

Major influences on seeking to be an institute manager

- other IMs or senior staff (6)
- negative role models (3)
- previous acting opportunities in the position (3)

'I had a college director who encouraged and supported and developed (my) confidence'

Preparation for the role of institute manager

When asked if they felt prepared for their first role as an IM the responses were:

- prepared (4)
- unprepared or only partly prepared (5)

'I didn't receive any kind of formal preparation'

The preparation the IMs received for their role basically fell into:

- self initiated preparation (6)
- learned on the job (4)
- internal staff developments (4)

'Privately I prepared myself very well'

Matching expectations

- did not match expectations (4)
- expectations met (3)
- changes in role meant that expectations no longer met (2)

'I'm not sure I had an expectation. I hoped to be able to make a positive difference in the role. Sometimes I feel I do, often not because of the structural impediments'

The best aspects of being an institute manager

- being in current position and working with associated staff (5)
- ability to influence outputs and change (4)
- flexibility and variety in job (2)

'I feel that I can make some things happen'

The worst aspects of being an institute manager

- lack of power in decision-making process (4)
- insecurity, uncertainty and lack of consistency in TAFE (4)
- frustrations of the job (4)
- lack of time to do the job (3)

'In some ways the frustrating thing - the battle - with all jobs is that you've never got total autonomy'

Elements of workload of the institute manager

- meetings (9)
- communications, especially emails (7)
- dealing with teaching sections (4)
- strategic work (4)
- educational development (3)

'I get 20 to 30 e-mails a day plus paperwork through the mail and there's the telephone voicemail'

Preferred workload of the institute manager – redesigning the role

When asked how they would prefer to spend their day the responses included:

- more time spent working with teaching sections (4)
- time to build the core business (4)
- more time on strategic issues (3)

'We carry a constant load of problems you know are never going to go away... I would like more closure on more of the things I deal with'

Personal leadership style

Participants described their own leadership style as:

- participative or consultative (5)
- situational (4)

'I respect (the staff) because they're good people. They have the ability. I offer advice and direction. There is mutual respect'

Influences on and development of leadership style

- IMs previously worked with (5)
- positive role models (3)
- negative role models (3)

'There were things about his style I had problems with but he was a thoroughly decent human being as well as a manager. This (was) more important than management triumphs'

Current involvement in decision-making, leadership and change

- total or considerable involvement in college decision-making (9)
- very involved in Institute decision-making (1)

'I don't personally have the influence. I'm not seen as a major decision-maker'

Preferred involvement in decision-making, leadership and change

- more involvement wanted in Institute decision-making (9)

'I'm frustrated that (changes) take so long. Decisions have to go through this process. They talk about it but nothing ever changes'

Professional development needs

- leadership and management issues (5)
- developments and directions in TAFE/vocational education and training (3)
- finance training (3)

'There's not an area where I don't need development'

How the professional development needs are being met

- needs not being met (5)
- uncertain if needs are being met (2)
- needs being met through self-initiated, informal, on-the-job training (2)

'No, they are not being met. Staff development is inappropriate and out of date'

Perceived future in education

- remain in current role (6) (of these, 5 see it as their preferred future)
- leave TAFE (2) (not their preferred future)

- college director's position preferred (1)

'I view the future bleakly. (TAFE) will be pared down. I'm quite disenchanted at the moment'

Recommendations

The aim of this study was to present the thoughts of a group of IMs in TAFE. It was not to generalise to another time or place. There is no claim that the IMs interviewed for this study are representative of IMs or middle managers in TAFE specifically or vocational education and training generally.

On becoming an institute manager

Career development for the IMs should be considered and planned for. The abilities of the IMs should be identified, their preferences determined and training and development experiences provided that will align the skills of the IMs with the future needs of the organisation. It is also important that aspiring IMs are considered in this career planning, with opportunities for them to be developed into future, vacant IM positions.

Preparation for the role

Along with the need for career planning and development there also appears to be a need for experience in the IM position for aspiring IMs. This could be provided by rotating different people through acting experiences in the various positions, or could take the form of passing information on through a mentoring program married with formal development programs.

Performing the role

To successfully lead change in TAFE, managers must consolidate their relationships with Head Teachers and other staff in teaching sections while exploring avenues for growth and innovation in educational leadership. Having the time to satisfy these requirements of their positions is of paramount importance. Of equal importance is the necessity for the IMs to have the authority, influence and power to make and take decisions that will allow them to fulfil their job responsibilities. Some of the operational tasks of the IMs must be removed and a more efficient way of dealing with the enormous number of emails received each day needs to be devised.

Leadership style

The importance of role models cannot be overlooked when analysing the development of IMs' leadership styles. Formalising the process of mentoring within the organisation could take advantage of the influence of positive role models. It would also assist in the development of IMs and aspiring IMs, as identified earlier in this paper.

Involvement in decision making, leadership and change

Involving the IMs in more of the higher level decision-making, especially that relating to change, would not only motivate the IMs but would improve the change process through utilisation of their innovative ideas.

Professional development

A formal mechanism should be in place to enable all IMs to learn from the experiences of others. This form of professional development does not obviate the necessity for training and development experiences that align with the need for information on future directions and innovations in TAFE. Professional development on an ongoing basis should also promote an understanding of the way change is managed constructively, particularly within the context of vocational education and training. Professional development should be tied to both the needs of the organisation and the needs of individuals within the organisation. An individual needs analysis should be conducted with each IM to determine their deficiencies in terms of competencies required by the organisation (both for their current positions and for positions they may hold in the future). This procedure should be aligned with the career planning previously discussed.

The future of institute managers

The importance of the role of the IM in the current change process must be emphasised. They must be developed and supported in this role if they are to make a positive contribution to the future of TAFE. Future IMs must also be identified, supported and developed so that they can move into the role of IM with better preparation than those who currently occupy the position.

Conclusion

As mentioned in the abstract, this paper is a summary of the findings of a study into how TAFE IMs are managing within the changing environment of vocational education and training. It is obviously assumed that managers in TAFE are driving the changes needed within this new environment, but this study indicates that, in fact, they are not well prepared for their roles and are not receiving the professional development needed for them to lead the changes. There appears to be a need for TAFE IMs to be better prepared for their positions and for the higher level duties they are expected to perform in these positions.

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